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THE AMERICAN INSTITUTE OF SACRED LITERATURE

A PROFESSIONAL READING COURSE ON THE PREACHING TASK OF THE MODERN MINISTER

Conducted by

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Part V. The Achievement of Religion

Required Reading: Herrmann, *Communion with God*; Harnack, *What Is Christianity?* Brown, *Unity and Missions*.

Herrmann presents religion as God giving himself to men, pre-eminently, as God giving himself in Jesus. He finds the meaning of Christianity as communion with God, mediated by Jesus. The supreme religious fact has thus appeared in the course of human history. We actually have Jesus. So, while the whole biologic and social process is a development of extraordinary complexity, often baffling in the uncertainty of its meaning, we find it to be a process that has produced Jesus. He is illuminative of its meaning. We are inspired with hope and confidence in this dark and difficult world because we can live in the fellowship of God, who has given himself to us in Jesus.

Herrmann is thoroughly conscious of the objection that may be brought against his thesis on the ground that historical reports are at the best only probable. But he meets the objection with valid argument. The ground work of our Christian faith is not that Jesus actually did such and such things that are to be accounted redemptive work, and must surely be accepted as facts. It is not that he said thus and so, and that the very words are surely authentic and to be accepted as authoritative teaching. It might well be objected to such statements that the facts and the words cannot surely be proved. But it is not the Jesus of minute criticism in whom we believe. It is the Jesus of the gospels. The modern Christian is not concerned with seeking historical evidence about Jesus. He has seen in the gospels the revelation of a religious spirit. Jesus is there for any earnest reader to discover. The miracles may be explained in this way or in that, apocalyptic sayings may be genuine or not; but the great achieving human life, lived with God and with men, makes its own appeal to the soul. The influence of Jesus in the radiant, self-denying life revealed in the New Testament is testimony that Jesus was what the gospels so clearly present him to be.

The fact of supreme importance is that Jesus does actually mediate God to us now. We read the story, we enter into his experience, we meditate upon its meaning, and we actually find God coming nearer to us: selfishness is condemned, easy acceptance of conventional virtue is ashamed, cynicism is rebuked, pessimism

vanishes, fear is abolished, faith, hope, love are evoked, human service is inspired, prayer becomes inevitable; in the homely phrase, one "gets religion."

As an experience of God in the human soul, religion may well be thought of as a gift. The evangelical words that speak of God's grace, of the bestowment of salvation, of the peace passing understanding, are fully justified. The religious man always feels himself to be a recipient. Moreover, he feels himself to be an individual recipient. As Bousset well pointed out in *What Is Religion?*, the religious experience in its highest developments becomes individual. Race religion is not enough. When religion is most vital and most certain, it is intensely personal. The earnest religious soul cries, "My God!" There is nothing clearer in the New Testament than this individual sense of communion with God. Whenever in its history Christianity has been most vital, this individual experience has been most clear. Not that the Christian feels himself to be alone; it is of the essence of his faith that he is conscious of sharing it with his brethren. Indeed, he nourishes his own faith upon the faith of others. He is urged into the fellowship of the Christian community. It always seems to him that he knows the God of Jesus just as every disciple of Jesus must know him. It is thus at the same time an individual faith and a communal faith, an individual experience and a communal experience. It is a personal religion and a church religion. God has given himself to the individual in Jesus, and he has given himself to the whole company of believers in Jesus. There is thus personal communion with God and social communion with God. It is all felt to be a gift from above.

What, then, is the achievement of religion? If religion is a gift, how can it be achieved? It is to be noted that the religious experience is not an isolated experience. It does not exist by itself apart from all the complex of social, intellectual, moral experiences that are the result of inheritance and of environment. The religious spirit in seeking a harmony of all these experiences under the dominance of the sense of religious values is engaged in the task of working out his own religious total. He has a certain world-view which is part of his culture. His communion with God leads him to an endeavor to interpret or evaluate his world-view in accord with his own religious experience, and with the experience of his fellows in the faith, and with the experience of those who have given classic utterance to the faith, especially in the sacred books. This is the process of making his theology. Evidently much of it is a cultural achievement. The results cannot be the same with different men and in different societies.

The modern preacher is sure of the value of his own religious experience. It is the worthfulness of that experience that has made him a preacher and given him his message. He feels the urgency of bringing people into the joy and freedom and wealth of religious living. But he cannot give his religion with all its thought-system to another. He must not forget that very much of what seems to him to be his gospel is really the theology that he has won for himself (if so be he has won it and not accepted it). He must not, then, carry over the urgency of his longing to bring people into the fellowship of God through Jesus into an urgency to get them to agree with his views on religious matters. It is his task to mediate to them the experience of communion with God and to urge them to the understanding of truth for themselves, in which task preacher and congregation shall be workers together in freedom.

Again, however true the great conception of religious experience as a regeneration may be, the metaphor must not be pressed too far, for no man can be entirely born anew. He is in a certain social process, a certain social development. His morality is the morality of his group. If he is in earnest about living a religious life, he will be concerned to bring his conduct into harmony with the values which his religious insight has revealed to him. This may result in a great moral advance beyond that of his group. There may sometimes be a complete break with the customs of the past. But generally a man will not tear himself up by the roots, and generally it is better that he should not. Indeed, Christian history reveals the fact that men and societies have wrought out their own Christian ethics by the process of modification, revaluation, readjustment of the ethic already achieved in their own social culture. Morality is not an absolute. The manumission of all slaves in the Roman Empire would have disorganized society and done more harm than good. Paul sent Onesimus back to his Christian master. But the despised slaves became the brethren of their masters in the churches. All of us are entangled with prejudices and inherited customs. How shall we know what is social duty? It is a great quest. The preacher is to feel and to preach the blessedness of hungering and thirsting after righteousness and to set out with his people on the earnest search for personal and social righteousness. He must not dare to confuse his own peculiar ethical opinions with the religious experience of longing to do right.

Ethical religion is an achievement. What is Christian duty in the industrial and commercial nations, in the relations of races, in the caste system of India, with regard to the veneration of the dead in China and Japan? The answer to these questions is not given immediately in communion with God. The religious attitude constitutes the right condition for seeking the answer. But the continuous search for the way of duty must be made. And different peoples will reach different results. We cannot give our morality to others, and we must not demand that they accept it.

Again, religion must express itself and must grow by expression. What shall a man do to whom God has given himself in Jesus? If the religious experience were an absolutely new fact of human life, there would be some inevitable emotional expression. But of course it is not new. Fitting forms of religious expression have come to us from the practices of a thousand generations: prayer of many kinds, praise and song of many kinds, sacred places and times, words hallowed with usage, books in which other religious souls have written as they felt. Every people has these according to its heritage. Which are the best places for religion: temples, cathedrals, mosques, tents, bare meeting-houses? One person thinks that there must be beauty with holiness, another sees the danger of confusing aesthetic appreciation with religious feeling. One religious person must have song and prayer familiar through long ages and most deprecates a religious service that is not reverent. Another must have novelty and lightness, and his particular fear is that the service shall be dull. Monotonous chants are religious to some peoples, rich harmonies appeal to others, tambourines are necessary to others. To some, sacraments are essential to the religious life; to others, sacraments are trivial. Some can only worship under the guidance of duly appointed ministrants; others are willing to accept any guide who knows the way to the

holy places of religion, and judge him by his fitness to lead them; still others are happiest when worship is most unconventional, individual, and spontaneous.

Perhaps there are higher and lower forms of religious expression. It is the task of the religious educator to test that matter with all the skill he may have. But no one may say that worship must have this particular form or that. The preacher is seeking to help people to communion with God through Jesus, but he must not prescribe the outward practices of that communion. Worship must be free, religious expression must be an achievement. Most of us will find it naturally in the ways of our fathers and of our own people. But if we do not, no one must seek to bind us. And we must beware lest forms once helpful as wings to devotion may lose their power and become burdens to be carried. A vital Christian worship is not an achievement to be attained once and for all, but an ever-new achievement of vital piety. When we seek to mediate our religious values to another people who have not our faith, then least of all must we identify the divine communion with the forms which it has assumed in our own land or in our own church. Why should Chinamen have Gothic churches with spires and stained windows? Why should they sing Western songs to Western tunes? Why should they say our prayers? True worship is not a gift, but an achievement.

Once more, the religious fellowship will inevitably seek organization. The individual religious spirits will be drawn together to share the common faith, hope, and love, and the assembly will take institutional form. What shall that form be? We shall not get it experientially, either directly or through the mediation of the spiritual experience of others. It will inevitably grow out of our social culture. Ecclesiastical polity, church order and procedure, are not given, but are wrought out. They are not revelations; they are economies. The modern preacher holds them as such, offers them to people as convenient means of religious activity, but binds them not at all upon the conscience of his hearers. Nay, he bids them examine all such and see if the church be adequately organized for its task in the modern world. When the preacher goes abroad with his gospel, he must not drag an occidental organization with him. Who knows of what type organized life and religious fellowship in India or in Africa ought to be? May not some of our customs be entirely unsuited to such different peoples? Are they ready for some of our extreme democratic methods of handling church affairs? It has become generally recognized that they do not need our denominations. Perhaps the genius of their life may not run to committees, boards, conventions, synods, courts, and ecclesiastical politics. The organized life of a Christian community is a thing to be achieved.

Every point in the above discussion is abundantly proved historically. We read Harnack's *What Is Christianity?* in order that we may see how the religious experience of Jesus has given rise to organized Christianity, which has expressed itself in so many different theologies, moralities, liturgies, politics. The history of Christianity is the history of the constant endeavor to achieve religion. The great Christians always "got religion" from Jesus. But then they had to work it out from an experience into a life: a thought life, a conduct life, a worship life, a church life. Harnack shows us how this was done in each case according to the racial spirit. There was first a Jewish Christianity, and there was great question whether there could be a Christianity that was not Jewish. Then there

was a Greek Christianity, and the dominant intellectualism of Greece gave that Christianity its form. This has become static in the Greek churches of today. Then there was a Latin Christianity, which made of the church another Roman Empire, and that empire is still the ruler of men today. Its weakness is in the fact that the imperial spirit does not belong to modern life. Then there was a Christianity which Harnack regards as fashioned by the German spirit, when the new freedom of Northern Europe found that it must have new forms of thought and life. Harnack might have gone farther and found in the Anglican church a distinctly English spirit, and in the great free churches of England and Scotland, with their extraordinary enlargement in North America, have seen a modern spirit different from all of these, which may perhaps be designated as the democratic spirit.

It is noteworthy in Harnack's discussion that he distinguishes the creative epoch, when religious experience was vital and the spirit of the age wrought out the new religion suited to its character, from the succeeding times, in which religion became merely an inheritance which the generations did not need to achieve. It is still our danger today. Harnack points it out clearly for the Lutheran state churches. It is no less a danger of all the churches. We must come anew to Jesus and to the communion with God which he mediates, and then find for our own day the theology, the morality, the worship, the church, that is needed. Every people must do this. And if Christianity is to go to Asia and Africa, the peoples of those lands must be suffered to do it also for themselves.

The problem is a particularly interesting one as it affects Christian missions. Brown has presented certain phases of the subject in *Unity and Missions*. He is particularly concerned with denominationalism, and makes a clear plea for organic Christian unity. It is a good survey of the economic waste, the triviality, the unreality of the present denominational situation in England and America. It is utterly unanswerable in its application to the foreign-mission problem. The stupidity of offering Western denominational differences to Orientals and Africans needs no serious consideration to become apparent. Dr. Brown touches also the deeper question of the achieved morality and religion of the non-Christian peoples. The subject demands the most thorough and sympathetic examination. If the Oriental says, "I cannot accept your creed, but I can accept your Christ," it is evident that we are called upon for some very careful analysis. We fall back on Herrmann's historic fact of Jesus, with the conception of Christianity as communion with God mediated by Jesus. He is not a German or an English or an American Jesus. Or, rather, he is such, and also a Chinese and Japanese and Indian and African Jesus. We cannot give the Oriental our religion, for the simple reason that it is ours, wrought out in our thought life and social *milieu*. We can help him, if we are wise enough and restrained enough, in his own task of achieving a Christian religion for himself. Christianity has not gone very far in any land as long as it is regarded as "the foreigners' religion." The Japanese do not look upon scientific medicine as foreign, although they are perfectly aware that they learned it from the West. But they have made it their own, and are pursuing independent investigations that are making it increasingly their own. They do not regard their representative government as foreign, although they have taken over the parliamentary system of the West. They retain the symbolism

of the emperor as the incarnation of the Japanese idea. Their government seems better to them than ours, with our caricatures, our scurrilities, and our familiar patronage of our chief magistrate. So must their Christian religion and their Christian morality grow out of their own culture and historic traditions, inspired by the spiritual power and moral passion of Jesus. We have made Jesus so Western that we have forgotten that he was Asiatic. The missionary must be willing for him to be Asiatic again. Dr. Brown most pertinently states that in Eastern lands he was often surprised to discover how small certain matters appeared which in America had seemed very important, and how greatly significant appeared new issues which he had scarcely considered before. If the report is true that an emancipated Chinese woman recently said, "I am a new woman. I play bridge all day and I dance all night," it would seem desirable that the process of emancipation should proceed slowly. We have done little for any people when we have destroyed the old moral sanctions, unless we are very sure that new moral sanctions have been attained which will be really effective. Is it not still true that Jesus has come not to destroy, but to fulfil?

The modern preacher in America must preach often upon missions. He ought to preach very interestingly and intelligently on both home and foreign missions, for there is no more important matter in the activities of the church. He will always find a few enthusiasts prepared to follow him. But there is a vast skepticism in the church about missions. Many have a superficial contempt for all "inferior peoples," and think that any effort to mediate to them the values of our culture must be useless. Many others have an equally superficial idea that every people has the religion and morality which is suited to it, with which it is both impertinent and futile for us to meddle. We need a large social sympathy, that we may appreciate the achievements and the possibilities of other folk. The missionary enterprise must be laid deep in a respect for the culture and the virtues of peoples whose lives are different from our own, whether they be the foreigners who come to our shores or the peoples of distant lands with whom we are coming into such close contact in these days. Indeed, this goes far beyond what is more narrowly described as missions, and embraces all our social and evangelistic activities. Jesus' life and teachings point us to the service of men, because they are worth serving. The great social enterprise of the church is grounded in the fact that humanity is good enough to demand our largest interest and sacrifice. But, on the other hand, one religion is not as good as another. The morality of no people is good enough. It is not an arrogance, but sober sense, to recognize that some great human values have been achieved in Christianity which are higher than those which some other people have achieved in the same sphere. As Dr. Brown has pointed out, the problem of sex morality, fearful as it is in Christian lands, is more serious in other lands, because we have at least our strong Christian sense of sexual purity. Fear of the gods, and servile effort to avert their wrath and to curry favor, are still found over vast regions of the earth. Jesus has set us free, revealing in himself the God of righteousness and love with whom we have fellowship, and from whom we receive peace and joy. Dr. Brown presents the matter aright in his question, "What have we to offer?" We may gladly grant that this must be supplemented with the question, "What have we to learn?" But as surely as scientific medicine must displace magical

treatments the world over, so surely must the world learn communion with God through Jesus.

The preacher, then, must make people responsible for their own religion. Too much has he been an apologist for a deposit of faith. He has grudgingly permitted some departures from accepted thought and custom. He has identified religion with his own conceptions and practices. But the gospel is a confidence that men can be trusted to find in Jesus the way and the truth and the life. Our fellowship with one another is not that we may settle truth and duty by majorities, but that we may inspire one another to earnest effort. Our fellowship shall save us from idiosyncrasy or self-assertive peculiarity. It shall help us toward the great common human experience and religious experience. The fellowship of thought and worship and activity shall bring to us the great common elements of religious life. But freedom shall be conserved and promoted.

We go back to Herrmann's book to note this spiritual freedom. And this may appear in what is a limitation of the book. The religious experience is "described on the basis of Luther's statements." One is conscious of the effort of the writer to interpret Luther. It is the interest of a Lutheran, which those of us who are not Lutherans do not share. It makes very little difference to us whether we agree with Luther or not. But Luther represents a great religious experience. Unfortunately, his words have become standard for the conservative Lutheran, and unduly important even for the progressive Lutheran. To others they have simply their inherent worth. And the great Reformer does inspire us. We have no interest whatever in making people Lutherans, but we do desire the Christian experience which was so gloriously manifest in Luther. Thus the attitude of the non-Lutheran towards Herrmann's discussion, interested pre-eminently in communion with God, and only incidentally in the Reformer's ideas about it, is typical of the attitude of Christian freedom which the modern preacher must assume for his own religious achievement, for that of his congregation, and for that of all peoples whose evangelization he seeks to promote.

Topics for Discussion

1. To what extent is religion an achievement in our own experience?
2. In what sense would we say that our own personal morality is an achievement?
3. Consider how far modern Christianity has the static character of which Harnack speaks. What is the cause of it?
4. How far is confessional unity essential to organic Christian unity?
5. Would the religious experience described by Herrmann be a sufficient basis for organic Christian unity?
6. What is involved in understanding the religion of a foreign people?
7. Have we anything to learn from the morality and religion of other peoples?
8. What is it reasonable to suppose that the Christianity of the future will be?

Books for Further Reading

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| Sabatier, <i>Outlines of a Philosophy of Religion.</i> | Faunce, <i>What Does Christianity Mean?</i> |
| Smith, G. B., <i>Social Idealism and the Changing Theology.</i> | Cairns, <i>Christianity and the Modern World.</i> |